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# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

### CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY

#### II. ALLEGORY AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF ORIGEN

IN spite of what has been said to the weakness of Christian historiography, it is possible to take a quite opposite point of view, and to maintain the thesis that, among religions, Christianity is especially notable as resting essentially on a historical basis.

In so far as Christianity was a historical religion, that was due, as has just been said, to the Messianic element in it. Indeed it can be said to have claimed from the beginning that it was a historical religion—a fulfilment of history, one fitting itself into the scheme of social and political evolution in a particular state. The apostles themselves, in their earliest appeal, demanded that one “search the scriptures”—a demand unique in the founding of religions. There is a vast difference, however, between studying history and studying historically. That they did study it, the one fact that the Christians retained the old Testament is ample evidence. That they failed to deal with it adequately, the New Testament is also ample evidence. But since the Christian Messiah was offered to the whole world as well as to the Jews, Christian historiography had two main tasks before it: it had to place the life of Jesus in the history of the Jews, upon the one hand, and in the general history of antiquity, upon the other. The latter problem was not forced upon the church until the pagan world began to take the new religion seriously, and its answer is found in the works of the great apologists. The relation of Christianity to Judaism, however, the Messianic problem proper, was of vital importance from the beginning, for it involved the supreme question whether or not Jesus was the one in whom the prophecies were fulfilled.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The coming of the Messiah was the main continuation of Jewish national history. Messiahship was to the Jews of the time of Christ the embodiment of somewhat the same thought as stirred the Frenchman of the close of the nineteenth century at the recollection of 1870 and the lost provinces, or lent such inspiration in embittered Poland to the prophet-like poetry of Mickiewicz. It was the dream of a deliverer, a belief strengthened rather than crushed by failure and disaster. The whole sad drama of Jewish history may be said to have

One "searched the scriptures" therefore for the evidences of the signs by which the advent could be recognized. The invitation to search them was, in appearance at least, a challenge to a scientific test, that of verification. If the data of the life of Jesus corresponded with the details of the promises, there was a proof that the promises had been fulfilled. But since the fulfilment was not literal, the interpretation could not be literal either. The spiritual Kingdom of the Messiah had to be constructed out of fragmentary and uncertain references, and the only satisfactory way to apply many of them was by symbolism and allegory. Modern scholarship has now discarded messianic prophecy, having discovered that the texts so confidently cited as foretelling the life of Jesus had no such purpose in the minds of their authors. But orthodoxy has held, through all the history of the church, that the texts were applicable and that the proof was thereby established of the harmony of the old and the new dispensations.

We can not turn, however, to the problems of higher criticism. The significant thing for history-writing was the creation of what might be called a new *genre*—that of the allegorical interpretation of texts. The use of allegory to explain, or explain away, texts was not a creation of Christian historians, for the device was not unknown to pagan literature or philosophy. As far back as the sixth century B.C., Homer was interpreted allegorically by Theagenes of Rhegium, and pagan philosophy had constant recourse to allegory to harmonize myth with reason. The Jews too were past-masters in its use; indeed it runs through the prophetic literature alongside that elusive trace of the unattained which gave the prophecies their fascinating charm. One could track it back farther still to the mind of primitive man, where symbol and reality are often confused into a single impression. But in the hands of the Christian theologians, symbolism emerged from the background of thought to dominate the whole situation. The story of realities depended upon the interpretation of the unrealities; and that story of realities was nothing short of a history of the world itself.

Allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament had been developed by the Jewish scholars, especially those of the diaspora, who found themselves thrown into contact with gentile scholars and felt the need of harmonizing Greek thought with their own intellectual heritage. One finds it to the full in the writings of the greatest Jewish philosopher of antiquity, Philo of Alexandria, who concentrated its expression in the messianic hope—a hope against hope itself. Christianity in offering itself as the realization of that hope was stepping into a definite place in Jewish history, but it was a place to which the Jewish nation as a whole has never admitted it.

lived at the time of Jesus. The extent to which he carried it may be gauged by his description of the Garden of Eden, whose four rivers became the four virtues, prudence, temperance, courage and justice, and the central stream from which they flow, the Divine Wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

The greatest master of Christian allegory was Origen. While not a historian in the stricter sense, he contributed to Christian historiography one of its most remarkable chapters. He not only denied the literal truth of much of Genesis, and explained away the darker happenings in the history of Israel; but, even in the New Testament, he treated as parables or fables such stories as that of the Devil taking Jesus up into a high mountain and showing him the kingdoms of the world. One reads Origen with a startle of surprise. The most learned of the Fathers of the third century was a modern. His commentaries upon the bible might almost pass for the product of the nineteenth century. The age of Lyell and Darwin has seen the same effort of mystic orthodoxy to save the poem of Creation, by making the six days over into geological eras and the story of Adam and Eve a symbol of human fate. Many a sermon upon the reconciliation of science and religion—that supreme subject of modern sermons—might be taken almost bodily from Origen. For his problem was essentially like that which fronts the modern theologian; he had to win from a rationalism which he respected, the denial of its inherent skepticism. Like Philo, a resident of that cosmopolitan center, Alexandria, that meeting-place of races and religions, Origen was a modern among moderns. He was a Greek of subtlest intellect and vast erudition, one of the finest products of the great Hellenic dispersion.<sup>3</sup>

Interpretation of the scriptures by allegory is not, in Origen's eyes, an unwarranted liberty. The scriptures themselves sanction it—allegorically! “There is a hidden and secret meaning,” he says, “in each individual word. The treasure of divine wisdom is hid in the vulgar and unpolished vessels of words; as the apostle also points out when he says, ‘We have this treasure in earthen vessels.’”<sup>4</sup> Quaintly naïve as such reasoning seems when based upon a single text, its weakness becomes its strength when sufficient texts are adduced to convey the impression that the scriptures themselves do really proclaim their own symbolic character. This Origen endeavors to do. “If the texts of Moses had contained nothing which was to be understood as having a secret meaning, the prophet would not have said in his prayer to God: ‘Open thou

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Allegories of the Sacred Laws*, 1: 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Church History*, Bk. 6, for details of Origen's life.

<sup>4</sup> *De Principiis*, I., 1: 9.

mine eyes and I will behold wondrous things out of thy law (Psalms, 119.18).'" What, he asks, can one make out of the prophecy of Ezekiel except allegorically?<sup>5</sup> Prophetic literature implies allegory in its very structure. But the strongest proof of the legitimacy of allegorical interpretation is its use in the New Testament, and so largely by St. Paul.<sup>6</sup>

The modern critic sees the vicious circle in which such reasoning moves. But he sees it because he denies the hidden meaning, the secret lore, which to the "intellectuals" of the third century was the real heart of phenomena. Symbolism has deeper roots than one suspects. The mysterious efficacy of numbers is as wide as savagery; the secret values of words is a doctrine as universal as speech. They come from untold ages beyond Pythagoras or Heraclitus. The Christian emphasis upon the logos—"the word which became God and the word which was God"—put the stamp of supreme authority upon a phase of thought intelligible to all antiquity. Gnosticism took hold of that phase, and by insisting upon an inner doctrine which was concealed from the uninitiated, attempted to harmonize Christianity with the parallel cults of paganism. Neo-platonism was doing much the same for paganism itself. The cults of Asia and Egypt were drawn together and interpreted in the light of the worship of Demeter or Dionysus. Origen's point of view is not so naïve as it seems. It was in line with that of his age. The world was a growing one, and yet the world itself was a medley of different civilizations. The only way the ancient could think of overcoming this antithesis between an ideal which unified and phenomena which differed was by denying the essential nature of the differences. We should do the same if it were not for our hypothesis of evolution and the historical attitude of mind. Only when one sees the *impasse* into which the thinkers of antiquity were forced, in their attempts to syncretize a complex and varying world, does one realize by contrast what a tremendous implement of synthesis the evolutionary hypothesis supplies. The only alternative method by which to realize the harmony which does not appear is by symbolism.

If we once grant that texts are not what they seem, there is only one way to learn their true meaning. We must find a key, and that key must be some supreme fact, something so large that the content of the text seems but incidental to it. Christianity supplied such a clue to the interpretation of the Old Testament; and the Old Testament, upon its side, supplied Christianity with the authority of a long antiquity. The value of that antiquity for the basis of a story of obscure, recent happenings in Jerusalem was

<sup>5</sup> *Against Celsus*, 4: 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, 4: 49.

felt by all apologists, and has been a convincing argument until the present. It was left for the nineteenth century to substitute for symbolism the tests of historical criticism, and thus to see the whole scheme of theological interpretation fade away. But we should not forget that, false as it seems to us in both method and results, the symbolic method made the theologian somewhat of a historian in spite of himself; and we should not expect of the savants of the third century the historical and evolutionary attitude of to-day—which was, so far as we can see, his only alternative.

Symbolism may twist the texts; but a mind like Origen's does not miss the essential point that the texts must be there to twist. Nothing is more interesting in the historiography of early Christianity than to see how Origen came to realize, after all, the paucity of his sources and their inadequacy, particularly those dealing with the history of Christianity itself. He shows this with scholarly frankness in a passage in his famous apology *Against Celsus*. Celsus was a pagan Greek who wrote the most notable attack upon Christianity of which we have record from those early times. His treatise was a powerful and learned criticism of the Christian writings and teachings, especially emphasizing their unscientific character and the credulity of those who believed in them. Origen's reply reveals in more places than one how in him a genuine historical critic was lost in the theologian. To illustrate: Celsus had claimed that before writing his attack he had taken the trouble to acquaint himself with all the Christian doctrines and writings. Origen, drawing on his prodigious knowledge of the bible, shows time and again what a superficial acquaintance it had been—that is, judged according to Origen's method of interpretation. But when Celsus charges the Christians with obscurantism, stating that their teachers generally tell him "Do not investigate," while at the same time exhorting him to believe, Origen takes another tack.<sup>7</sup> He is apparently a little ashamed of the emphasis taken from reason and placed upon faith by his Christian colleagues. He does not actually say as much, but he reminds Celsus that all men have not the leisure to investigate. After this weak admission, however, he turns round, in what is one of the most interesting passages of patristic writing, and demands if Celsus and the pagans do not follow authority as well. Have not Stoics and Platonists a teacher too, whose word they go back to? Celsus believes in an uncreated world and that the flood (Deucalion's) is a fairly modern thing.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. I., 12 and 10. The order of citations has been reversed here for clarity.

<sup>8</sup> Celsus also had the idea of a common evolution of ideas and customs and of the borrowings of one nation from another, e. g., circumcision from Egypt (1: 22).

But what authority has he? The dialogues of Plato? But Moses saw more clearly than Plato. He was in incomparably better position to be informed. Why not prefer the account of Moses?

The value of a controversy is that each side sees the other's weak points. It seldom results in admitting the inferiority of your own position; but once in a while a fair-minded man will be courageous enough to state that, through no fault of his own, he is unable to be more accurate than his opponent. This is about what Origen does, in taking up the charge of Celsus that the narrative of the baptism in the Jordan is so improbable a story as to require confirmation of first-hand witnesses, before he as a thinking pagan could accept it. In reply Origin frankly admits the paucity of sources for the history of Christianity; but demands to know if Celsus is willing to give up pagan history because it contains improbable incidents. The passage is worth quoting, for it shows how the most learned man of all the Fathers, the most subtle and comprehensive intellect, with one exception, which Christianity enlisted to its cause, recognized the weakness of Christian historiography but failed to see how it could be remedied.

Before we begin our reply we have to remark that the endeavor to show, with regard to almost any history, however true, that it actually occurred, and to produce an intelligent conception regarding it, is one of the most difficult undertakings that can be attempted, and is in some instances an impossibility. For suppose that some one were to assert that there never had been any Trojan War, chiefly on account of the impossible narrative interwoven therewith, about a certain Achilles being the son of a sea-goddess Thetis and of a man Peleus, or Sarpedon being the son of Zeus, or Asculapius and Ialmenus the sons of Ares, or Æneas that of Aphrodite, how should we prove that such was the case, especially under the weight of the fiction attached, I know not how, to the universally prevalent opinion that there was really a war in Ilium between Greeks and Trojans? And suppose, also that some one disbelieved the story of Oedipus and Jocasta, and of their two sons Eteocles and Polynices, because the sphinx, a kind of half-virgin, was introduced into the narrative, how should we demonstrate the reality of such a thing? And in like manner also with the history of the Epigoni, although there is no such marvellous event interwoven with it, or with the return of the Heracleidae, or countless other historical events. But he who deals candidly with histories, and would wish to keep himself also from being imposed upon by them, will exercise his judgment as to what statements he will give his assent to, and what he will accept figuratively, seeking to discover the meaning of the authors of such inventions, and from what statements he will withhold his belief, as having been written for the gratification of certain individuals.

And we have said this by way of anticipation respecting the whole history related in the Gospels concerning Jesus, not as inviting men of acuteness to a simple and unreasoning faith, but wishing to show that there is need of candor in those who are to read, and of much investigation, and, so to speak, of insight into the meaning of the writers, that the object with which each event has been recorded may be discovered.

In so many words Origen admits that since the sources for

Christian history can not be checked up by external evidence, there is nothing left but to accept their main outlines on faith—the same faith the Greek has in the existence of Troy or the Roman in the early kings. But being a Greek—and above all a Greek in argument—he qualifies his faith by reason and explains away what seems improbable. In a way, therefore, we have before us a sort of sophisticated Herodotus after all, who eliminates myth to suit his perspective.

Had the Christian world been and remained as sophisticated as Origen, the conception of biblical history for the next fifteen hundred years would have been vastly different. But, although the allegorical method of biblical interpretation was used by nearly all the Fathers—by none more than by the pope whose influence sank deepest into the Middle Ages, Gregory the Great—and still forms the subject of nearly all sermons, the symbolism and allegory came to be applied less to those passages which contained the narrative, than to the moralizing and prophetic sections. The stories of the creation, of the flood, of Joseph, of the plagues in Egypt, of Sodom and Gomorrah, were not explained away. But about them, and the rest of that high theme of the fortunes of Israel, were woven the gorgeous dreams of every poetic imagination, from Origen to Bossuet, which had been steeped in miracle and rested upon authority. One turns to Sulpicius Severus, the biographer of the wonder-working Martin of Tours, for the bible story as it reached the Middle Ages. The narrative of the Old Testament was taken literally, like that of the New; the story of a primitive people was presented to a primitive audience. Allegory was not allowed to explain away passages which would have shocked the critical intelligence of Hellenic philosophers, for those were the very passages most likely to impress the simple-minded Germans for whose education the church itself was to be responsible.

There was, however, a better reason than mere credulous simplicity, why Jewish and Christian history were not allegorized away. It was because that history had been made credible by an exhaustive treatment of chronology. Christian scholars took up the task of reconciling the events of Jewish history with the annals of other histories, and worked into a convincing and definite scheme of parallel chronology the narrative from Abraham to Christ. Mathematics was applied to history—not simply to the biblical narrative but all that of the ancient world—and out of the chaos of fact and legend, of contradiction and absurdity, of fancy run riot and unfounded speculation, there was slowly hammered into shape that scheme of measured years back to the origins of Israel and then to the creation, which still largely prevails to-day. This is one of

the most important things ever done by historians. Henceforth, for the next fifteen centuries and more, there was one sure path back to the origin of the world, a path along the Jewish past, and marked out by the absolute laws of mathematics and revelation. An account of how this came about will carry us back into that complicated problem of the measurement of time, which we have considered before, in its general aspects. Now, however, we come upon the work of those who gave us our own time-reckoning, and who in doing so molded the conception of world history for the western world more than any other students or masters of history.

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(*To be concluded.*)

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#### A THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE WHICH FOREGOES METAPHYSICS. IN REPLY TO DR. SCHILLER

THERE are whole ranges of man's effort toward intelligent insight which, even in our day, are rendered taboo by the sign and bugbear Speculation. The advance in the sciences during recent decades has done much, it is true, to hearten and reassure the timid that the implied curse is not so fearsome. The mathematician leading the way, and physics, chemistry, biology following, have transformed the unapproachable place into a veritable treasure-house of their offerings. Even the Gradgrind type of Empiricist is no longer taken aback by supersensuous biophors, transcendental functions, or symmetrical points in muscles. But this resolving of the taboo is to be noted chiefly on one avenue of approach to the dreaded Metaphysic. It is recognized that the *outcome* of empirical investigation is usually metaphysical entities and supersensuous relations such as electrons, a perfectly elastic medium, or the relation called heredity. The fact that more mathematics can be used in dealing with certain phenomena than in those of recurrent and age-weary problems is not one to blind the modern physicist or biologist to the character of his conclusions, as frankly a projection of scientific imagination in accord with available data.

But is it less frequently recognized that the general assumptions and methods employed in any investigation are themselves hypotheses which also determine the resultant interpretation. Even the simple-minded would, it is true, realize that the method which admits two and only two terms (say matter and motion) presupposes that other assumed entities can be reduced to these terms. A method which interprets chemical qualities as groupings of "constituent" atoms or